

Those magnificent men and their flying machines

It's easy to see why Roger Bergerson found that the hardest thing about writing his book, "Winging it at a County Crossroads," was stopping. The book's topic — Minnesota's first full-service airport — is so captivating that it's hard for a reader to stop, too.

Curtiss Northwest Airport occupied the southeast corner of Larpenteur and Snelling avenues from 1919 to 1930, and Bergerson's book tells the story of its genesis and demise.

Bergerson, a Como Park resident, has long been interested in the history of his neighborhood. He lives on Frankson Avenue, named after a Minnesota lieutenant governor who built the prominent house on Midway Parkway right across from Como Park and who donated buffalo and deer to the zoo.

Years ago while Bergerson was waiting at the Insty-Prints that was located at Larpenteur and Snelling, he chatted with shop owner Dale Beane about the airfield photo on the wall. Years later, while doing research on the Como neighborhood, he remembered that picture and began delving deeper into the airfield's story.

"The subject material got richer and richer and more and more promising" the further he explored that era, says Bergerson. "It was a story waiting to be told."

It was one that needed to be told soon, too, because fewer and fewer people remembered the airport, and soon much of the story would be lost. Most current residents of the area are unaware that there was once an airport in their neighborhood.

Bergerson has a journalism degree from the University of Minnesota and has been a reporter for the Pioneer Press, a state Senate researcher and a freelance writer. Although he had co-written a history of 3M's pharmaceutical business, he had never written a book by himself.

Bergerson credits the assistance of Noel Allard, executive director of the Minnesota Aviation Hall of Fame; Sharon Shinomiya, a neighbor who helped with research at the Minnesota Historical Society; and his partner and in-house editor, Valerie Cunningham.

One of the book's strengths is the photographs (over two dozen), many of which were supplied by Allard. Others came from different sources, including several of Glenn Curtiss, an aviation pioneer and the first man to fly an airplane in Minnesota.

Curtiss was an inventor and rival of the Wright brothers who popularized flying by barnstorming the country, staging aerial shows that included wing-walking and stunt flying. By 1916, Curtiss headed the country's largest aviation company, set up airplane dealerships and opened flying schools.

One of those dealers was Bill Kidder, a P.T. Barnum type who saw the possibilities of aviation and bought 75 used Curtiss Jennys, an airplane that had been used for training in World War I. He built an airfield in rural Rose Township, calling his company the Curtiss Northwest Airplane Company and naming the field Curtiss Twin City Airport, later Curtiss Northwest Airport.

Before long, people were making the trek to the "country" to see air shows, take Sunday afternoon plane rides and, eventually, buy and fly planes themselves. Regulation was minimal at best.

Kidder ran the flying school, sold planes and parts, established the first air cargo business, delivered mail and dusted crops. The airfield prospered in the early 1920s but lost out, first to the Wold Chamberlain Field (now the Minneapolis St. Paul International Airport), and later to St. Paul's downtown airport. The airport closed for good in 1930.

This fascinating story kept Bergerson working off and on for two years. His first idea of selling the story as a magazine article gave way to writing an entire book as the amount of information grew. The availability of a wealth of photographs was a bonus.

Bergerson says he learned a lot about publishing a book in the process. As a self-publisher, he had to obtain copyrights, find a designer and printer, get a bar code and Library of Congress number and so forth. Now he's ready to sell the book, with a first run of 500 copies.

Though he would like to write another book, Bergerson is skeptical about finding another subject as engrossing and surprising as this one. So, for now, we will have to be content with "Winging it" — not a difficult task at all.